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ABSTRACT

This study focused on professional commitment to school psychology among practicing school psychologists. Burnout, school system reductions, and demographic characteristics were examined with respect to school psychologists' commitment to their profession. The results revealed that burnout had a significant relationship to professional commitment among the 181 school psychologists who participated in the survey. More specifically, the school psychologists who had a lower sense of personal accomplishment at work tended to be less committed to the profession. Surprisingly, professional commitment had only a modest relationship to reductions in school system resources and a statistically nonsignificant relationship to reductions in school psychology staff. Women were significantly more committed to school psychology than were men in the sample. The highest degree attained was unrelated to professional commitment. The findings of this study have implications for recruitment, training, and retention of school psychologists as well as for future research in the area. Instruction in strategies that enhance a sense of work-related personal accomplishment might help strengthen an individual's identification with school psychology and increase his/her motivation to advance the profession. The lower professional commitment of men coupled with their minority status in the profession suggest that it might be important to direct efforts toward recruiting men into school psychology and making the profession more attractive to them as a long-term career. (Author/NB)

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Commitment to the Profession of School Psychology: An Exploratory Study

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Running Head: Professional Commitment

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Abstract

Burnout, school system reductions, and demographic characteristics were examined with respect to school psychologists' commitment to their profession. Burnout had a significant relationship to professional commitment among the 181 school psychologists who participated in the survey. More specifically, the school psychologists who had a lower sense of personal accomplishment at work tended to be less committed to the profession. Surprisingly, professional commitment had only a modest relationship to reductions in school system resources and a statistically nonsignificant relationship to reductions in school psychology staff. Women were significantly more committed to school psychology than men. Highest degree attained was unrelated to professional commitment. The implications of the results for recruitment, training, and retention of school psychologists, as well as for future research are discussed.

Professional commitment is a potentially important factor in the continued success of professions and associations that represent and support professions, such as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Despite the significance of professional commitment, little attention has been given to the topic until recently. Morrow & Wirth (1989) attributed current interest to the increasing number of professionals in the workforce and public perception that American workers are no longer highly committed to doing a good job. Professional commitment has been defined as: (a) belief in the significance of the aims and values of the profession, (b) a willingness to work toward advancing the profession, and (c) a desire to maintain membership in the profession (Aranya, Pollock, & Amernic, 1981). Morrow (1983) has theorized that professional commitment is one of five types of work commitment. The four other types of work commitment are: (a) work ethic, (b) career salience, (c) organizational commitment, and (d) commitment to organized labor (e.g., unions). The broad rubric of work commitment has been viewed as an important component of an individual's identity, competing with other sources of identity, such as the family (Loscocco, 1989). Most of the research on work commitment has focused on organizational commitment and suggests that a lack of commitment is related to several organizational problems, including absenteeism (Shore & Martin, 1989).

Our investigation focused on professional commitment to school psychology among practicing school psychologists. Professional commitment to school psychology is intriguing for three reasons. First, we could locate no research on possible antecedents to professional commitment with respect to any speciality area of psychology. Second, long-term shortages of school psychologists have been predicted for the United States (Connolly & Reschly, 1990). In addition, these shortages may be exacerbated by school psychologists choosing alternative careers (Knoff, 1990). Third, school psychologists, like other workers, have been confronted with the threat job loss during one of the longest recessions in United States history. In Massachusetts, for example, over 30% of the school systems surveyed either eliminated or reduced the hours of school psychology positions between September 1990 and November 1991 (Kruger, Wandle, & Watts, 1992). Given the prospects of long-term shortages coupled with short-term threats to job security, the wellbeing of school psychology may be particularly dependent on the professional commitment of its practitioners.

The purpose of our study was to examine the relationship between professional

commitment to school psychology and three types of variables: burnout, organizational reductions, and the demographic characteristics of school psychologists. Burnout has been defined as a reaction to chronic problems in coping with stress (Cherniss, 1980). Maslach and Jackson (1986) have posited that burnout is a three dimensional construct comprised of (a) lack of personal accomplishment with respect to work, (b) feelings of emotional exhaustion, and (c) feelings of depersonalization (e.g., treating students in an impersonal manner).Though previous research (e.g., Huberty & Huebner, 1988; Huebner, 1992; Pierson-Hubeny & Archambault, 1987) has explored the correlates of burnout among school psychologists, the relationship between burnout and professional commitment has not been explicitly investigated. Research has linked high levels of burnout among school psychologists with several adverse factors, such as job dissatisfaction (Huebner, 1992) and role stress (Pierson-Hubeny & Archambault, 1987). Huebner (1992) came the closest of any of these investigators to explore the relationship between burnout and professional commitment. He examined one indicator of professional commitment, desire to leave the profession, finding that a strong desire to leave the profession was related to two of the burnout dimensions, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. However, the issue of whether these burnout dimensions would be related to the larger construct of professional commitment remains unclear. We hypothesized, based on Huebner's (1992) results, that high levels of burnout would be related to low levels of professional commitment.

The second type of variable investigated with respect to professional commitment was organizational reductions. Though research has indicated that organizational factors such as an employee's role in decision making is related to organizational commitment (Mathiew & Hamel, 1988), we could find no published research linking organizational reductions with professional commitment. The importance of understanding the correlates of organizational reductions has been underscored by the recent recession. However, it should be an ongoing concern of practitioners and researchers given that organizations often expand or contract in size because of changes in an organization's external environment, such as demography or the overall health of the economy. We predicted that school system reductions in resources (e.g., secretarial support) and in school psychology staff would be related to lower professional commitment among school psychologists.

Loscocco (1989) has asserted that work commitment might be more completely understood if nonwork variables were studied in addition to work variables. Consistent with this assertion, we

examined two nonwork setting, demographic variables: gender and highest academic degree attained. The presence of differences in professional commitment relative to gender or highest academic degree attained might have important implications for the recruitment and training of school psychologists, as well as for the associations (APA & National Association of School Psychologists[NASP]) that represent the profession. We made no specific predictions for either of these nonwork variables. Research on organizational commitment has revealed no gender differences in commitment (e.g., Bruning & Snyder, 1983). Based on this research alone, it might be hypothesized that there would be no gender differences with respect professional commitment. However, organizational commitment is conceptually and empirically distinct from professional commitment (Morrow & Wirth, 1989). Thus, findings based upon organizational commitment might not be generalizable to professional commitment. In regard to the relationship between highest academic degree attained and professional commitment, arguments can be advanced for two possibilities. First, school psychologists with doctoral degrees might feel more committed to the profession than those with sixth year specialist degrees or master degrees. In most cases, school psychologists with doctoral degrees have invested more money and years studying to become a school psychologist than those with less advanced degrees. Therefore, it may be highly dissonant for doctoral level school psychologists to think that all the time, money, and effort spent was not for a worthy cause. Also, doctoral level school psychologists have the support of the APA which recognizes the doctorate as the minimum entry level degree for independent practice as a school psychologist. In contrast, it is possible that school psychologists with the sixth year specialist degree might be more highly committed to school psychology because the largest organization exclusively representing school psychologists, NASP, has recognized the sixth year specialist as the minimum entry level degree for independent practice as a school psychologist.

Method

Questionnaires were mailed to 443 school psychologists who were listed in the Massachusetts School Psychologists Association database as school-based practitioners. Four weeks after the mailing, postcard reminders were sent to all potential respondents. Participants were requested to complete the questionnaire if they had worked for a school system at anytime during the prior 1 1/2 years. Of the 205 questionnaires (46.3%) that were returned, 181 were usable for data analyses. Twenty-four questionnaires were discarded for one of two reasons: (a)

the potential respondent was not a practicing school psychologist, or (b) not all questions were answered. The mean age of 181 participants was 46.6 years (SD = 9.2). The mean number of years experience as a school psychologist was 12 (SD = 6.4). Seventy-two percent of the participants were women. In regard to highest attained degree, 30% had a master's degree, 50% had attained a sixth year specialist degree, and 20% held a doctoral degree.

Professional commitment was measured with a ten item Likert-type scale derived from the research of Morrow & Wirth (1989). These researchers found that the scale significantly correlated with self-reported behaviors reflecting professional commitment (e.g., belonging to professional associations). In addition, they found the internal reliability of the scale to be satisfactory , α = .89. For our study, the scale was changed in two ways. The adapted scale had anchor points on a seven-point scale ranging from *very strongly* disagree (1) to *very strongly* agree (7). The previous version ranged from *strongly* disagree (1) to *strongly* agree (7). In addition, we substituted "school psychology" for the generic term "profession." The adapted scale had an internal reliability of α = .87.

Burnout was measured with the second edition of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). The MBI is comprised of three scales reflecting a three dimensional conceptualization of burnout: Depersonalization (5 items), Personal Accomplishment (8 items), and Emotional Exhaustion (9 items). Each of the 22 items is rated relative to frequency of occurrence from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). Higher scores on Depersonalization and Emotional Exhaustion scales, and lower scores on the Personal Accomplishment scale are reflective of greater burnout. Extensive research on the three scales suggested that they have adequate validity and reliability (see, e.g., Lee & Ashforth, 1990; Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Participants also were queried on possible reductions that might have occurred in their school systems during the previous 1 1/2 years. In particular, they were asked to indicate the following: (a) reductions in school psychology staff in their school systems; and (b) the types of resources reduced.

Results

The mean level of commitment to school psychology was 5.43 (S.D. = .82) (1 = lowest possible score, 7 = highest possible score). This level of professional commitment was similar to results obtained by Morrow and Wirth (1989) (M = 5.67,S.D. = .82) for a group of professionals

working at a major university. However, a direct comparison between the studies' results was compromised by our change of the labels on the extreme anchor points on the Likert-type scale. Mean scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory were 40.45 (S.D. = 5.90) for Personal Accomplishment, 3.81 (S.D. = 3.99) for Depersonalization, and 22.22 (S.D. = 10.92) for Emotional Exhaustion. Overall, the Depersonalization and Emotional Exhaustion scores were slightly lower and the Personal Accomplishment scores were slightly higher than scores reported from national samples of school psychologists (Huebner, 1992; Huberty & Huebner, 1988). Forty percent of the participants indicated that their school systems had either reduced the hours of school psychologists or eliminated school psychologist positions. In addition, 76% of the participants indicated that they had experienced at least one reduction in resources. The most frequently cited reduction (60%) pertained to supplies.

Simultaneous multiple regression analyses were used to examine the relationships between (a) burnout and commitment to school psychology, and (b) school system reductions and commitment to school psychology. In both analyses, commitment was used a dependent variable. In the first regression analysis, the three burnout variables, as a group, were significantly related to commitment, adjusted $R^2 = .25$, $F(3, 177) = 20.6$, $p < .0001$. An investigation of the semipartial correlation coefficients of three burnout variables relative to professional commitment revealed that Personal Accomplishment, $sr^2 = .13$, $T(3,177) = 5.49$, $p < .0001$, and Depersonalization, $sr^2 = .03$, $T(3,177) = 2.59$, $p = .01$, had statistically significant relationships to commitment. Moreover, the relationships between the independent variables of Personal Accomplishment and Depersonalization and the dependent variable of professional commitment were in the expected directions: higher Personal Accomplishment was associated with higher professional commitment, and higher Depersonalization was associated with lower professional commitment. In the second regression analysis, two independent variables were used: (a) reduction in school psychology staff, and (b) reduction in work resources. Considered together, the two variables were unrelated to commitment, adjusted $R^2 = .02$, $F(3, 177) = 2.70$, $p = .07$. However, reduction in resources had a small but statistically significant relationship to commitment, $sr^2 = .03$, $T(3,177) = 5.49$, $p = .02$.

Because of the unequal number of male (N = 50) and female respondents (N = 131) and

the unequal number of respondents who had Master's ((N = 54) , Specialist ((N = 91), and Doctoral (N = 36) degrees, nonparametric tests were used to investigate the relationship between professional commitment and gender, and between professional commitment and highest degree attained. The Mann-Whitney U test for two groups revealed a statistically significant relationship between gender and commitment, $z = 2.53$, $p = .01$. Women were more committed to the profession than men. Though the difference in means for the total commitment scale was not large (women = 5.52, men = 5.19), each of the 10 item means were higher for women (see Table 1). The Kruskal-Wallis H test for three or more groups, was non-significant in regard to the relationship between highest degree attained (master's, sixth year specialist, or doctorate) and professional commitment, χ^2 (2) = .56, p = .75.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

Burnout among this sample of school psychologists had a significant relationship to commitment to school psychology: In combination, the three burnout variables accounted for 25% of the variance in professional commitment. The squared semipartial correlation coefficients indicated that of the three burnout variables, Personal Accomplishment had the strongest relationship to professional commitment. Indeed, Personal Accomplishment *uniquely* accounted for 13% of the variance in professional commitment. School psychologists who felt they had accomplished worthwhile things at work tended to be more committed to the profession of school psychology. Though the relationship between Depersonalization and professional commitment was somewhat weaker than the relationship between Personal Accomplishment and professional commitment, it was nonetheless statistically significant. School psychologists who were more likely to emotionally distance themselves from students (i.e., had higher Depersonalization scores) were less committed to the profession. Thus, not only has burnout has been found to be related to negative outcomes, such as job dissatisfaction (e.g., Huebner, 1992), but the results of our study suggest that burnout might be an important factor related to weak professional commitment. Though the precise nature of the causal relationship between professional commitment and burnout is unclear, our results taken together with other research findings underscore the need to develop approaches to prevent burnout among school psychologists.

We were surprised that school system reductions had a relatively weak relationship to professional commitment. One possible explanation is that reductions were relatively recent events. Perhaps for such reductions to affect professional commitment they need to be endured for a longer period of time. A research design that facilitates assessment of the duration of the reductions might address this possibility. A second possible explanation is that a direct relationship between some types of reductions, such as staff ones, and professional commitment does not exist. For example, the loss of a colleague may be distressing and sad, but if a school psychologist's sense of personal accomplishment is not dependent on collaboration with this colleague, then the school psychologist's professional commitment might be relatively unaffected. Thus, an individual's affective reaction (e.g., level of burnout) to work might be a more important antecedent to professional commitment than objective characteristics of the work setting (e.g., staff reductions).

Women practitioners were more highly committed to the profession than men practitioners. Thus, not only are there fewer men than women in school psychology but the men in school psychology also might be less likely to want to advance the aims of the profession. Men might feel less committed to school psychology because they are in the minority and perceive it to be a "woman's" profession. Men only comprised 28% of our sample, and nationally only 35% of school psychologists are men (Graden & Curtis, 1991). Another possible explanation for this difference between men and women is that educational professionals are often paid less than their professional counterparts in business. Many men may still feel the need to be the "bread winner" and earn more money than women, and therefore are less committed than women to a profession which offer limited possibilities for promotion and higher salaries. Finally, it is possible that supervisors and other educational professionals prefer to work with women school psychologists. Consistent with this explanation, Miller & Routh (1985) found that supervisors of school psychologists were biased toward interviewing and hiring female applicants. These researchers speculated that supervisors may view school psychology as a profession that is most appropriate for women.

No differences in professional commitment were found relative to the highest academic degree attained. This finding might be a partial outcome of the support that the sixth year specialist and doctoral degrees have from NASP and APA, respectively. Both associations have considerable influence on the profession of school psychology. Therefore, practitioners who have either of the

two degrees feel strongly committed to the profession. However, neither NASP nor APA approve of Master's level training and yet practitioners with Master's degrees were no less committed to the profession than their counterparts with more advanced degrees. Therefore, the standards of professional associations by themselves are an insufficient explanation for why there were no differences in professional commitment with respect to highest academic degree attained.

Clearly, further investigation of professional commitment is needed. Despite the intriguing relationships found between professional commitment on the one hand, and burnout, reductions in resources, and gender on the other, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to other school psychologists and professions. Our research was conducted with school psychologists from one state, who may not be representative of all school psychologists or representative of other professionals. Thus, one possible direction for future research is replication. Our study, for example, could be replicated with a nation-wide sample of school psychologists or with psychologists representing a different speciality area. In addition, studies with longitudinal or experimental designs can be carried out to determine if factors, such as sense of personal accomplishment, are antecedents to professional commitment. The possible reasons for lower professional commitment among male school psychologists could be explored. Also, it might be interesting to compare directly the extent to which nonwork and work factors predict professional commitment. In this regard, work factors not addressed in our study, such as job autonomy, can be used. The possible contribution of professional commitment to an individual's overall sense of identity is another area that can be explored. Finally, more research should be done on the the validity of the professional commitment measure, particularly in the area of discriminant validity (Morrow & Wirth, 1989).

Our results have possible implications for the training and continuing education of school psychologists. For example, instruction in strategies that enhance a sense of work-related personal accomplishment might help strengthen an individual's identification with school psychology and increase his/her motivation to advance the profession. The lower professional commitment of men coupled with their minority status in the profession suggest that it might be important to direct efforts toward recruiting men into school psychology and making the profession more attractive to them as a long-term career.

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Table 1

Means of the Professional Commitment Items: Comparison of Men and Women Participants

Item	Men	Women	All
1. I talk up SP to my friends as a great profession	4.14	4.45	4.36
2. For me, SP is the best of all possible professions	4.36	4.75	4.64
3. I feel very little loyalty to SP	5.58	5.75	5.71
4. I am proud to tell others that I am part of SP	5.36	5.83	5.70
5. I am glad that I work as a school psychologist	4.90	5.39	5.25
6. I really care about the fate of SP	5.86	6.02	5.98
7. SP really inspires the very best in me	5.42	5.59	5.54
8. I find that my values and SP's values are very similar	5.44	5.73	5.65
9. I am willing to put in effort to help SP be successful	5.04	5.47	5.35
10. Deciding to work in SP was a definite mistake	5.78	6.19	6.08
Overall Mean	5.19	5.52	5.43

Note. Wording of some of the items was truncated to conserve space. SP = school psychology. Higher ratings are reflective of greater commitment. Ratings of all items with exception of items 3 and 10 are based on seven-point scale: 1 = very strongly disagree, 7 = very strongly agree. For comparison purposes, ratings for items 3 and 10 were reverse coded on a seven-point scale: 7 = very strongly disagree, 1 = very strongly agree.